DEVELOPING A WRITTEN PLAN AND PROGRAM POLICIES FOR IMPLEMENTING A SYSTEM FOR CHILD ASSESSMENT

Guidance for Rhode Island's Early Childhood Education Programs

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states that policy makers, the early childhood profession, and other stakeholders in young children's lives have a shared responsibility to make "ethical, appropriate, and valid and reliable assessment a central part of all early childhood programming."

High-quality early childhood education programs have written plans and program policies in place to guide administrators and teachers in the planning and implementation of child assessment at both the program and classroom level.

These documents:
- Reflect research and best practices in the field of early childhood education,
- Help teachers to understand the uniqueness of every child and support each child's growth and development,
- Support administrators in utilizing child assessment data to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the program,
- Comply with the educational and structural standards set forth in Rhode Island's Education's Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program standards,
- Comply with other federal, state, or local regulations governing the program,
- Result in positive outcomes for all children, including children with special education needs.

Standards 8.1 through 8.10 of the Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Standards state that:

(8.1) The program has a written philosophy statement and written practices on child assessment that guide the implementation of a system of assessment that includes both classroom-based and norm-referenced assessment strategies.

(8.2) Norm-referenced and standardized tests are used primarily when seeking information on eligibility for special services or when collecting information for overall program effectiveness and are implemented by qualified professionals. When these assessments are used, they are combined with other methods such as observations, checklists, rating scales, and work sampling to obtain an ongoing, comprehensive assessment of children's progress over time.

(8.3) The program staff provide families with information about how assessment is used by the program. This information includes:

a. The purpose and use for which an assessment is designed and its programmatic purpose and use.
b. The interpretations of the results and their meaning in terms of future learning opportunities for their child.
c. The way teaching staff or others have been trained to use assessment procedures and interpret results as well as the conditions under which the child will be assessed (e.g., group size, time constraints, familiarity with adults involved).
d. Access to or information about the specific instruments used.

(8.4)   The program has a written plan and description of practices for implementing a child assessment system that is aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and program curriculum. For kindergartens, the child assessment system is aligned with applicable Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Grade Level Expectations (GLEs). The plan also includes:
a. Timelines associated with assessments that occur throughout the year
b. Procedures to keep individual child records confidential
c. Ways to involve families in planning and implementing assessments and
d. Methods to effectively communicate assessment information to families.

(8.5) The program provides teachers with adequate time and classroom support to successfully implement a system of authentic assessment.

(8.6) The program collaborates with Child Outreach programs to screen children annually.

(8.7) Families have ongoing opportunities to share the results of observations from home to contribute to the assessment process and the identification of goals for the child.

(8.8) The program makes provision for teachers, families and relevant specialists to have regular opportunities to participate in two-way communication conferences to discuss each child's progress, accomplishments, difficulties in the classroom and at home as well as to plan learning activities. This includes providing family members with information, either verbally or in writing, about their child's development and learning on at least a quarterly basis, with written reports at least two times a year as part of the parent conferences.

(8.9) The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies in child assessment.

(8.10) The program uses child assessment to:
a. Ascertain the degree to which the program is attaining desired child outcomes and goals for children.
b. Identify patterns and trends across the program.
c. Inform the program's improvement plan and professional development of staff.

The following guidance will assist programs to develop a written plan and program policies that guide the implementation of child assessment practices:

Identifying Core Competencies Needed by Administrators and Teaching Staff

Standard (8.9) states: The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies in child assessment.

Program administrators must take the time to identify what administrators and teaching staff need to know and be able to do to gather, analyze, and use child assessment data at both the program and classroom levels.

At the program level, administrators design and implement a program-wide system for child assessment that:
- Aligns with the RI Early Learning Standards and/or Kindergarten GLEs,
- Utilizes authentic child assessment practices to gather information on children,
- Integrates the appropriate use of norm-referenced assessment,
- Provides adequate planning time and resources for teachers to implement the system,
- Produces both child-specific and program-wide data that is useful to both teachers and administrators.

To accomplish this task, administrators must hone competencies to:
- Lead the program's efforts to implement a system of child assessment,
- Monitor the child assessment system to ensure that:
  - teaching staff collect child assessment information in an ongoing and timely way,
  - the information that is collected by teachers is reliable,
  - the data is analyzed and used on a regular basis to inform curriculum planning at the classroom level,
- Resolve issues that arise during the monitoring process,
- Engage in data-based decision making by:
  - Aggregating and analyzing program-wide data
  - Using assessment data to assist in the design, delivery and evaluation of the program.

In addition, administrators use the information about what teachers should know and be able to do to implement the child assessment system successfully to recruit, train, and support a workforce that can meet the demands of a high performing early childhood program.

The competencies that teachers need include:
- Engaging in effective authentic assessment,

- Understanding the developmental continuum, or phases that children experience as they move towards accomplishing each learning goal,
- Implementing different strategies to ascertain children's interests and learning styles,
- Utilizing a multi-method approach for gathering information that includes family interviews, child observations, interpretation of children's work, and other assessment methods,
- Documentation and recording,
- Planning for initial assessment of children entering the program,
- Developing and implementing a long range plan for ongoing assessment that addresses all the learning goals of the RI Early Learning Standards and/or Kindergarten Grade Level Expectations and is integrated into children's daily schedule,
- Using the information to plan for individual, small group, and large group learning opportunities for children.

Administrators must regularly evaluate the progress that staff at all levels of the organization have made in achieving competencies related to child assessment and use this information to design a professional development plan to move the program forward.

To identify the early childhood core competencies needed by administrators and teaching staff, programs should consult resources such as:
- Institutes of Higher Education,
- RIDE Office of Educator Quality and Certification,
- NAEYC and other professional organizations,
- Bright Stars, RI's Quality Rating and Improvement System,
- The Early Childhood section of RIDE's website (www.ride.ri.gov) for information on the RI Early Childhood Core Competencies and Career Lattice (draft).

RIDE is currently working with state-wide early childhood experts and stakeholders to update and finalize a set of early childhood core competencies, the RI Early Childhood Core Competencies and Career Lattice. Once complete, this information will assist program directors in identifying what staff members should know and be able to do to be successful in implementing child assessment.

Developing a Program Philosophy

Standard (8.1) states: The program has a written philosophy statement and written practices on child assessment that guide the implementation of a system of assessment that includes both classroom-based and norm-referenced assessment strategies.

The philosophy statements developed by high-quality comprehensive programs should reference the program's values and beliefs pertaining to child assessment and how this information is used to inform both curriculum planning and program improvement planning.

According to the NAEYC position statement, the key purposes for child assessment are to:
1. Make sound decisions about teaching and learning,
2. Identify significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children,
3. Help programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.

To determine if your program needs to refine its philosophy to include information regarding child assessment, program administrators should ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the program currently have a written philosophy statement that references child assessment and is available to program staff, families and other interested people?

- Does the statement include the recognition of children's varying developmental levels, unique learning styles, and interests?

- Does the statement articulate the purpose for gathering child assessment information and the program's commitment to support each child's individual growth and development?

- Does the statement reflect best practice in the field?

- Is the philosophy statement written in a way that is understandable to staff and families?

Developing a Written Plan and Program Policies

Standard (8.1) states: The program has a written philosophy statement and written practices on child assessment that guides the implementation of a system of assessment that includes both classroom-based and norm-referenced assessment strategies.

Programs must have a written plan and program policies in place that describe how the program will implement child assessment practices. These documents should help teachers to view assessment as a meaningful and dynamic part of working with young children and be based on commonly-held theories, current research, and promising practices in the field of early childhood.

The written plan will guide teachers in recognizing that their classroom curriculum creates the context for observing what children can do as they work in interest areas, participate in large- and small group and individual activities, and go through the routines of the day. Their

observations, collected over time, and combined with other assessment information become the basis for decision making at the classroom level.[1]

To determine if your program should develop or refine written plans and program policies pertaining to child assessment, program administrators should ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the program have a written plan and description of practices for implementing a system of authentic assessment aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and/or Kindergarten Grade Level Expectations and program curriculum?

- Does the written plan describe the process that teachers should use to complete an initial assessment of children's skills and dispositions in all domains and learning goals addressed in the Standards and/or GLEs?

- Does the plan include strategies for using multiple sources of information, including information from families in the child assessment process?

- Does the plan include strategies for gathering information from natural settings and situations that reflect children's actual performance?

- Does the plan include guidelines for the use of norm-referenced or standardized assessments?

- Does the written plan include a plan and time frame for gathering ongoing assessment information in all domains and learning goals addressed in the Standards and/or GLEs?

- Does the plan include strategies for engaging families in providing information on their children's developmental levels, learning styles and interests as part of the assessment process?

- Does the plan include a description of practices for using assessment information in planning for and implementing activities that reflect children's developmental levels, preferred learning styles and interests?

Collecting Child Assessment Information

Standard (8.4) states: The program has a written plan and description of practices for implementing a child assessment system that is aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and program curriculum. For kindergartens, the child assessment system is aligned with applicable Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Grade Level Expectations (GLEs). The plan also includes:

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[1] *Beyond Outcomes, How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum, Diane Trister Dodge, et al., http://www.fcs.utah.edu/info/cfdc/5170/Beyond_Outcomes.pdf*

> **a. Timelines associated with assessments that occur throughout the year**
> **b. Procedures to keep individual child records confidential**
> **c. Ways to involve families in planning and implementing assessments and**
> **d. Methods to effectively communicate assessment information to families.**

Standard (8.2) states: Norm-referenced and standardized tests are used primarily when seeking information on eligibility for special services or when collecting information for overall program effectiveness and are implemented by qualified professionals. When these assessments are used, they are combined with other methods such as observations, checklists, rating scales, and work sampling to obtain an ongoing, comprehensive assessment of children's progress over time.

Standard (8.5) states: The program provides teachers with adequate time and classroom support to successfully implement a system of authentic assessment.

Standard (8.6) states: The program collaborates with Child Outreach programs to screen children annually.

To assess young children's strengths, progress, and needs, early childhood professionals must use a variety of methods for collecting child assessment information that are:
- authentic and ongoing,
- developmentally appropriate,
- culturally and linguistically responsible,
- tied to children's daily activities,
- supported by professional development,
- inclusive of families, and
- connected to specific, beneficial purposes.[2]

Written plans should guide teachers in utilizing a multi-method approach for gathering child assessment information that includes (1) observation and recording, (2) analyzing children's work, and (3) conducting interviews.

The following chart depicts a variety of authentic assessment methods that can be used to gather child information to achieve a multi-method approach:

Methods for Collecting Authentic Child Assessment Information

OBSERVATIONS	CHILDREN'S WORK	INTERVIEWS

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[2] National Association for the Education of Young Children's and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education position statement on child assessment

Running Records	Work Samples	Child Interviews
Anecdotal Observations	Photographs	Parent interviews
Checklists	Audio tapes	Significant Others
Rating Scales	Video Tapes	Child-to-Child Survey
Journal Entries	Child Created Books	
	Rubrics	

Written plans and program policies should also address how Child Outreach information is obtained and used by the program to augment child assessment. Child Outreach provides a universal developmental screening system designed for all children 3 to 5 years. Screenings are offered through local school districts in partnership with the RI Department of Education. Screening can provide a resource to families about general child development, but also may serve as the first step in identification of children who might have special education needs. The process involves a brief assessment in the following five areas of development:

- Vision
- Hearing
- Speech and Language skills
- Social Development
- General Development, including, but not limited to general and fine motor skills, language, and cognition

Families must provide written permission for Child Outreach Screening to occur. Information associated with screening is confidential, but can be shared with preschool programs with express permission from a parent or guardian. Written plans and policies must outline the process the program will use to partner with families to access and utilize Child Outreach information to augment the program's system for child assessment.

Although child assessment systems should be based for the most part on authentic assessment practices, programs must also recognize the role that norm-referenced and/or standardized assessments play in both the identification of children in need of specialized services and in program evaluation. Written plans and policies should describe when and how these assessments will be used and ensure that they are administered by qualified staff, consultants, or community partners.

Engaging Families in the Child Assessment Process

Standard (8.3) states: The program staff provide families with information about how assessment is used by the program. This information includes:

a. The purpose and use for which an assessment is designed and its programmatic purpose and use.
b. The interpretations of the results and their meaning in terms of future learning opportunities for their child.
c. The way teaching staff or others have been trained to use assessment procedures and interpret results as well as the conditions under which the child will be assessed (e.g., group size, time constraints, familiarity with adults involved).
d. Access to or information about the specific instruments used.

Standard (8.4) states: The program has a written plan and description of practices for implementing a child assessment system that is aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and program curriculum. For kindergartens, the child assessment system is aligned with applicable Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Grade Level Expectations (GLEs). The plan also includes:
a. Timelines associated with assessments that occur throughout the year,
b. Procedures to keep individual child records confidential,
c. Ways to involve families in planning and implementing assessments and
d. Methods to effectively communicate assessment information to families.

Standard (8.7) states: Families have ongoing opportunities to share the results of observations from home to contribute to the assessment process and the identification of goals for the child.

Standard (8.8) states: The program makes provision for teachers, families and relevant specialists to have regular opportunities to participate in two-way communication conferences to discuss each child's progress, accomplishments, difficulties in the classroom and at home as well as to plan learning activities. This includes providing family members with information, either verbally or in writing, about their child's development and learning on at least a quarterly basis, with written reports at least two times a year as part of the parent conferences.

Written plans must articulate the important role that families play in the child assessment process. The written plan and program policies should outline the process by which families are informed of:
- General information about the purpose and use of child assessment plus specific information on how it is used in the program,
- How the results are analyzed and used to plan future learning opportunities for their child,
- The way teaching staff or others have been trained to use assessment procedures and interpret results as well as the conditions under which the child will be assessed (e.g., group size, time constraints, familiarity with adults involved),

- How they can access or obtain additional information about the specific instruments used by the program.

The plan should also describe how families contribute to the child assessment process by providing valuable information about their child's development. The written plan should describe how this information is obtained from family members and incorporated into the data collection process.

Families must also have regular opportunities to communicate with teaching staff regarding their child's progress. Programs should give careful thought to the approach that is used by teaching staff to communicate children's progress to ensure that it is consistent with best practice and communicates strengths and progress over time relative to the domains and learning goals of the RI Early Learning Standards and/or Kindergarten GLEs. Written plans and program policies should outline the process used to share information on the progress of children during face-to-face meetings with family members and in writing. Parent conferences must occur on at least a quarterly basis and written reports must be shared with families during those conferences at least two times a year.

Collaborating with the Public School District's Early Childhood Special Education Team in the Assessment Process

The written program plan and policies should include a description of the established systems for collaboration with the public school district's Early Childhood Special Education Team (including the family) in the assessment process. Establishing assessment systems for program's serving children with IEPs requires close collaboration with both families and special education staff.

The family is always the first and most important source of information when working with children with special needs. It is essential for the family to authorize communication between special education providers and early care and education staff.

Children with special education needs have a wealth of preexisting assessment information, individual education plans and goals that need to be fully utilized by programs. The written plan should address how the expertise of families as well as the Early Childhood Special Education Team will be used to plan educational services for children with IEPs. Families, early care and education, and special education must work together to establish an inclusive team to guide instruction and promote positive outcomes for children with special education needs.

Specific question to address in the plan include:

1. How is parental release of information obtained?
2. What is the process for establishing communication with the early childhood special education providers?

3. What meetings are scheduled with the Early Childhood Special Education Team?
4. Who should be in attendance at meetings (i.e. Education Coordinator, teaching staff, family members, internal experts, outside experts, community partners)
5. What are the roles and responsibilities of team members in child assessment?
6. How will these meetings be documented and how will information be shared?

Developing a Systematic Plan for Assessing Children

The written plan is used to guide teaching staff in the development of a systematic plan for implementing child assessment in their classrooms. A systematic approach to observing children, analyzing children's work, and conducting interviews opens the door to appreciating each child's unique qualities and strengths.

The assessment plan used by teachers to collect child information must:
- Guide them in completing an initial assessment of each child shortly after they begin the program,
- Embed assessment into ongoing activities,
- Ensure that information is being collected in an ongoing, authentic way,
- Allow teachers to spread the assessment process out over time,
- Help teachers to take full advantage of opportunities that arise for gathering information,
- Provide information and documentation to use for designing learning activities and to share progress with families.

When developing the written plan, administrators must consider the degree of flexibility they will afford teaching staff in designing their own child assessment plan and timeline. This decision should be based, in part, on the expertise of teaching staff and the amount of support and supervision that teachers need to accomplish program-wide child assessment targets.

Plans and timelines should address both:
- the initial assessment of children to ensure that baseline information is gathered, and
- ongoing assessment throughout the year to ensure that teachers gather information to inform them about the developmental level of each child in relation to all domains and learning goals of the RI Early Learning Standards/GLEs

Organizing Child Information

The written plan should outline how teaching staff will organize the information they collect. Many programs choose to adopt a child portfolio system for this purpose.

Some programs choose to adopt one program-wide system for teachers to follow; other programs provide teachers flexibility in designing their own system. In either case, the system used to collect and organize information should:

- Provide an organized, purposeful collection of information documenting a child's development and learning over time relative to the domains and learning goals addressed in the RI Early Learning Standards
- Allow teachers to demonstrate to the child, family and others, the progress, experiences, accomplishments and unique capabilities of each child.
- Be used as the basis for assessment and a guide for further learning and development

Maintaining Confidential Records

The program must develop procedures for maintaining child information and implement record-keeping polices that:

- Specify which records are to be considered confidential,
- Describe how confidential children's records will be stored so that they are only accessible to authorized persons,
- Identify where confidential records will be stored so that they can be accessed by authorized persons,
- Outline the process that authorized persons must use to access confidential records when planning services for children and families.

Linking Child Assessment and Curriculum Planning

In high-quality, Standards-based programs, administrators and teaching staff recognize that through effective systems of child assessment, teachers obtain a wealth of information regarding children's differences. This information is then used to design rich classroom curricula that:

- Recognizes where each child is on a continuum of learning,
- Reflects their knowledge of children's unique learning styles and interests,
- Varies instructional strategies in response to the learning styles of children,
- Offers challenging and achievable experiences that appropriately support each child's growth and development,
- Provides multi-level learning opportunities where children have multiple options and opportunities for learning and expressing what they have learned based on their individual differences.

This strong, inextricable link between child assessment and curriculum planning should be articulated in both the child assessment written plan and the written curriculum framework. In this way, teachers are aware of the program's expectations around the use of child assessment information and administrators are well-positioned to evaluate service delivery and support teachers in ways that have the greatest impact on child outcomes.

Allocating Time for Planning and Documentation

High-quality, effective child assessment can only be accomplished when teachers have adequate time to (1) embed child assessment into their curriculum and (2) document, organize, and evaluate the information they collect. The program's written plan and program policies must delineate planning time within staff work schedules and identify the specific responsibilities that need to be accomplished during this allotted time.

Using Child Assessment Information to Inform Program Improvement

Standard (8.10) states: The program uses child assessment to:
      a. Ascertain the degree to which the program is attaining desired child outcomes and goals for children.
      b. Identify patterns and trends across the program.
      c. Inform the program's improvement plan and professional development of staff.

In addition to analyzing and using child assessment information to inform classroom curriculum, programs need to take full advantage of how this information can be used to identify program strengths and potential areas of concern. Child assessment information, when aggregated and analyzed at the program level, can point to areas of the program where child outcomes either exceed or fail to meet program expectations.

The following scenario illustrates this point:

> One program which has aggregated their child assessment information and analyzed child outcome data notes that children in two classrooms are not progressing as well as other children in the area of language development and communication in both listening and understanding and speaking and communicating.

> The education coordinator decides that she would like to explore this further to determine the underlying cause and take steps to improve the situation. Her first step is to look more closely at the child assessment data. Does the quality of the child assessment data appear to be sufficient? Does the data appear to be documented adequately and with integrity? Is there any additional data or information that might be required?

Once the education coordinator is assured the assessment data is adequate, she decides to explore further to determine the underlying cause and take steps to improve the situation. She recognizes that there could be many factors that contribute to this finding. Examples might include:

- Lesson plans for children in these classrooms focuses on other domains and does not adequately address these specific learning goals
- Teaching staff did not accurately collect and analyze child assessment information for these areas of learning
- Teaching staff in these classrooms lack expertise in this area of teaching
- A high number of English Language Learners participating in these classrooms requires that teachers acquire and implement new teaching strategies

Following additional analysis and conversations with the staff, the education coordinator determines that the likely cause for this dip in outcomes is the fact that there are a high number of English Language Learners participating in these classrooms that require teachers to use new teaching strategies. Conversations with her teachers indicated that they felt under-prepared in developing language skills for children who are learning English as a second language.

The education coordinator then uses this information to inform her program improvement planning. She develops and implements a plan to provide professional development support to these teachers and makes plans to monitor future child outcome data to determine its impact.

Resources:
- *Beyond Outcomes, How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum, Diane Trister Dodge, et al., http://www.fcs.utah.edu/info/cfdc/5170/Beyond_Outcomes.pdf*
- *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8: A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, Adopted November 1990*
- *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria, 2005*
- *RI Early Learning Standards Level II Professional Development: Implementing a Standards-Based Program*
- *RI Early Learning Standards Level III Professional Development: The Administrator's Role in Implementing a Standards-Based Program*